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ABSTRACT

A preliminary study examined the experiences and perceptions of experienced teachers about writing and gathered feedback about teaching practices involving direct instruction in process writing. Subjects, 30 experienced elementary teachers enrolled in a graduate-level course on theories of teaching reading and writing, completed a survey about their writing practices and kept a response journal in which they responded to prompts four times during the semester. Results indicated: (1) the majority of subjects did not frequently (daily or weekly) engage in writing activities; (2) writing personal reflections/thoughts was the most frequent creative writing activity; (3) the overwhelming majority indicated a general uneasiness with writing academic texts; (4) the majority of subjects felt comfortable with the process of sharing paper outlines and felt they received valuable feedback from their peers; and (5) most of the subjects perceived themselves to be inadequate writers and expressed feelings of anxiety and frustration when required to write in an academic setting. Findings suggest that if the nature of writing instruction is to change at the classroom level, then teachers need to become writers themselves. (One table of data is included; 14 references, the survey instrument, and the prompts for the response journals are attached.) (RS)

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On Becoming Reflective Writers and Practitioners: Lessons from Experienced Teachers

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ON BECOMING REFLECTIVE WRITERS AND PRACTITIONERS: LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

Traditionally, past approaches to writing instruction tended to be teacher-centered and were usually limited to the English classroom. The English teacher often decided what students would write about, how much class time would be spent on writing, determined the criteria for grading, often focusing on grammar, mechanics and form, and was often the only audience for students' finished papers. However, recent evaluations about the status of writing instruction conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1990) indicate that in spite of English teacher involvement, U. S. students in general receive very little instruction on how to write. Moreover, students are given very little time during the school day to actually write, and most importantly, they are not required to write frequently (National Academy of Education, 1992).

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

If we assume the NAEP's 1990 findings are a reasonable indicator of actual classroom practice, then fundamental changes about the way American educators view and teach writing seem necessary. Theoretically, such changes have been occurring. For the past two decades, the process writing movement has gained considerable momentum (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Hayes & Flower, 1983; Smith, 1982; Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1991). At the heart of this movement is the notion that writing is a recursive process that can be used as a powerful tool for learning, and rather than continuing to promote classroom practices that emphasize written products exclusively, instruction needs to also emphasize the actual process of writing as well.

The implications of this line of thinking affect both teachers and students. For instance, within a classroom that emphasizes process writing, students will be more likely to choose their own topics for writing, state their purpose for writing, define their audience, create several written drafts, receive feedback from their peers and the teacher, and eventually, may even "publish" their work. The teacher's role will be to directly teach students about the writing process and about written forms, to provide authentic contexts for writing, to provide feedback during revising and editing, to model various stages in the process, and to focus assessment on both the thinking processes that writers use as well as the quality of the finished product.

The process writing movement also calls for writing instruction to begin at an early age, often as children are first learning to read. This suggestion is based on the theory that reading and writing are both transactive processes (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Rosenblatt, 1978). This theory assumes that reading and writing are sociopsycholinguistic processes that can be described as a "transaction", or interaction, between the

mind of the reader, the language of the text, and the social context in which reading and writing occur (Weaver, 1988). Meaning begins to be constructed when the reader draws upon her own personal experiences and relates them to what is happening in the text. When the reader writes about what she has read, she continues the transactional process by constructing a personal meaning using the text as a blueprint.

Notions about the transactional nature of reading and writing and the process writing movement provided the theoretical framework for this preliminary, qualitative study. As I began to prepare to teach a graduate level course entitled "Theories of Teaching Reading and Writing", I began to wonder about the students taking this course. How much experience did they have as writers? How comfortable are they with process writing? At the same time I was preparing for this course, I was also preparing a manuscript based on previous research I had conducted. I realized that I was actually living the writing process and decided that this may be an opportune time for me to model this process for my students, especially since writing a research report was a course requirement. Soon, a plan for conducting action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990) within my university classroom emerged. Specifically, I wanted to study my students, who were all experienced teachers, many of whom taught writing in elementary classrooms, in order to learn not only about their experiences and perceptions about writing, but to also provide me with feedback about how my teaching influenced them as writers and practitioners. Several research questions guided this action research.

1. How frequently do these individuals write creative, real life and academic texts?

2. What are their perceptions of themselves as writers of academic texts?

3. As participants engage in the writing process, are they comfortable with sharing their work in progress? Why or why not?

4. What occupies the minds of participants as they actually write a research report?

Definitions of terms

Creative writing is defined as writing poetry, short stories, and personal reflections/thoughts. **Real life** writing is defined as writing letters to friends, editors, political figures, organizations and/or corporations. **Academic** writing is defined as writing research reports. **Action research** is defined as systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by the teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 3).

Limitations of this study

First, this study is preliminary in nature which means that data were not triangulated to the extent that one would expect in a more formalized study. Second, response journal data were analyzed by only the researcher. Third, when action research is used as a method of inquiry, bias from the teacher-researcher may influence findings.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Thirty (n=30) experienced teachers enrolled in a 15 week, graduate level course entitled "Theories of Teaching Reading and Writing" participated in this preliminary study during the winter of 1992. For some participants, this course was required for their Masters program, but for others, this course was taken for professional development reasons. The study occurred at a small midwestern university of approximately 13,000 students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey. In order to answer the first two research questions, a survey about participants' writing practices (see Appendix A) was developed and administered the third week of the semester. The survey data were summarized by counting the frequency of responses within each category. Percentages were then computed. An independent rater, who was not associated with this study, also calculated frequencies and percentages, and reliability was 100%.

Response journals. In order to answer the third and fourth research questions, participants kept a response journal in which they responded to prompts developed by the researcher (see Appendix B). Four times throughout the semester, participants wrote in their journals.

Response journal data were informally analyzed as the study progressed since in qualitative research, simultaneous collection and analysis guides the researcher to focus attention on significant events (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1988). As I read and re-read participants' responses, I wrote "observer's comments", which were my personal thoughts and feelings about the data. I also attempted to write summary statements about the data.

Formal data analysis did not occur until all of the data had been collected. At that time, the response journal data were systematically analyzed using analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The unit of analysis was a single independent clause consisting of a subject, verb, and modifiers. Participants' journal responses were first chunked into idea units and then more detailed analyses occurred.

For research questions 2, 3, and 4, I used Glaser's (1969) Constant Comparative method whereby each idea unit was compared to

all other idea units in order to identify commonalities and exceptions within participants' responses. Then idea units were categorized by commonality and were labeled, or coded. After this, codes and their associated examples were re-read in their entirety in order to identify emerging themes across categories.

Findings

How frequently do these individuals write creative, real life and academic texts?

As Table 1 indicates, participants identified writing personal reflections/thoughts as the most frequent **creative** writing activity, followed by writing short stories and poetry. In terms of **real life** writing activities, the majority of participants (68%) wrote letters to friends most frequently; however 93% claimed they seldom or never wrote letters to editors or political figures. With regard to **academic** writing, the majority of participants (69%) said they seldom or never wrote research reports while the remaining responses indicated that some research report writing was done within the last year.

Table 1

Frequency of Participants' Responses on a Portion of the Survey

How often do you write: (n=26)	daily	weekly	monthly	yearly	seldom	never
1. poetry	0	1	1	5	19	0
2. short stories	0	3	2	4	15	2
3. personal thoughts or reflections	3	6	8	2	6	1
4. letters to friends	1	8	8	3	4	2
5. letters to editors or politicians	0	0	0	2	22	2
6. research reports	0	0	0	8	17	1

What are participants' perceptions of themselves as writers of academic texts?

The overwhelming majority indicated a general uneasiness with writing academic texts. Participants used words like "poor, awful, terrible, inadequate, insecure, unmotivated, and green (i.e. a beginner)" to describe their academic writing abilities. Only two responses, out of 26 total responses, indicated that participants felt "good" or "proficient" in their ability to write research reports.

Participants felt the most difficult aspect was conceptualizing the contents and organization of a research report. Other perceived difficulties included: knowing where to begin or deciding on a topic, locating easily accessible sources of information, and finding the time to write. A few participants felt that synthesizing information, editing, making transitions from one point to the next, and trying to meet the instructor's expectations were also areas of difficulty.

<u>As participants engage in the writing process, are they comfortable with sharing their work in progress? Why or why not</u>?

During the fifth week of class, participants were required to bring to class their research paper outlines to share with peers in small groups. So that participants would have experience in sharing outlines, I presented my research paper outline to the class via a transparency, and we discussed it. First we looked at the topic and whether or not it was manageable and clearly defined. Next we determined the appropriate audience for my research report. Finally, we looked at overall organization and discussed whether or not subtopics adequately addressed the main topic. After this brief sharing experience, participants broke into self-selected groups of two or three and shared their outlines. Prompt 1 (see Appendix B) was distributed at the end of class and was returned the following week.

Responses to prompt 1 indicate that 16 of 27 individuals (59%) felt comfortable sharing their paper outlines with their peers while four individuals (15%) felt "fairly comfortable" and 7 (26%) felt uncomfortable. The majority of participants felt their peers had something of value to contribute during the sharing process, which helped most writers gain perspective on their topics. In addition, participants who felt comfortable sharing claimed that the non-threatening classroom atmosphere helped to alleviate any initial apprehensions. When individuals expressed discomfort in sharing their outlines, responses such as, "I don't feel I write very well" or "I am not a self-confident person" were the norm. One individual expressed concern about sharing a work in progress due to "perfectionist's syndrome".

Just as the majority of individuals felt comfortable with the process of sharing paper outlines, 81% felt they received valuable feedback from their peers. Feedback helped some individuals to clarify and focus on a single, manageable topic, or, for those with well-defined topics, feedback provided reassurance that outlines "made sense" to someone other than the writer. For those participants who felt they did not receive valuable feedback, timing seemed to be the issue. For instance, some participants felt they had not completed an adequate amount of research prior to sharing their outlines, and for them, the sharing activity came too early in the writing process. For another, the sharing activity came too late, which meant that "the topic and paper was already

solidified, and the feedback I received did not cause me to expand or change this".

What occupies the minds of participants as they actually write a research report using the process writing approach?

Prompt 2 (see Appendix B) produced a plethora of responses about several aspects of writing. Responses were placed into several categories including affective comments, comments about the writing process, comments about learning from the experience, comments about the form of the research report, and comments about paper evaluation. Each category will be described below.

Affective comments. There were 29 idea units placed into this category, and only five expressed positive feelings during the writing task. Positive comments varied in nature, ranging from "[writing this paper] has produced a sense of excitement, curiosity, and interest on my part" to "after I had finally started, it felt so good to have something written on paper" to "spending time in a quiet library is very appealing to me at this stage of my life. No phone calls, no kids, no interruptions".

Feelings of uneasiness occupied the minds of many writers as they wrote their research papers. For some individuals, lack of experience with a computerized library system was "a humiliating, terrifying experience". For most others, however, frustration came from feelings of inadequacy. One person wrote, "I am frustrated. I have enough material, but how will I pull this together? I don't know where to start!" Other typical comments included "it has been many years since I've been required to write a research paper, and I feel uncertain in what I'm doing" and "I'm feeling frustrated because I don't feel confident as a writer, especially in this genre".

Writing process comments. The 36 responses in this category indicated that issues of purpose, how to begin, time constraints, and the cognitive demands of writing occupied the minds of many writers. Four individuals questioned the purpose of writing the research report. One person asked, "why is writing research reports such a big deal in grad school when as an undergraduate I never had to write anything like this?" A second individual questioned the relationship of writing a research paper and becoming a better teacher. For example, "Why do I have to write this paper? I'm worried about it. The worry comes from the conflict between writing the paper so that I can learn from it and be a better teacher, or to write it so that I will get a good grade."

Approximately one-third of the writing process comments expressed concern over organization--"where or how do I start?" as well as feeling the pressure of working under time constraints. One individual wrote "Pulling it all together and writing this

paper has been hard for me as well as time consuming. The time it is taking me is frustrating. I've been working on this paper since the first class and still have no clear end in sight . . . I feel a lot of pressure to do so much in such a limited time frame".

The majority of comments in this category acknowledged the cognitive demands of the writing process including both the importance of being organized when writing and the difficulty of doing so. Responses in general indicated that participants felt writing is hard work. Interestingly enough, even though all of the participants in this study are experienced teachers, and at least one-third of them currently teach writing, only one individual made a connection between herself as a writer and her experience as a teacher of writing. This is her story.

> Frankly, writing this research paper has been difficult for me. . . My saving grace has been my own fourth graders.
>
> I've tried to develop different teaching styles to adjust to the needs of my students. Now that I am a "needy" student, I'm trying to develop different learning styles to help me survive.
>
> In organizing the information for my paper, I followed the [semantic] mapping format I use with my more visual learners. My students have been so successful with this when they write, that it surely can't hurt me.
>
> From there, I tried to come up with a question to guide my writing, and my readers, through the paper: Can teachers instruct students on self-monitoring of comprehension?
>
> I did find it useful to have a "learning partner" in [the grad] class to go over my outline and rough draft, and I plan to use this idea with my students as well (Emily, 3/9/92).

Learning comments. Thirteen individuals made comments about their learning when responding to prompt 2. All were positive. Some participants approached the writing task as a learning experience and found benefits even though "it was overwhelming at first, it does eventually come together". Overall, respondents said they enjoyed the process of learning more about a topic that was of personal interest.

Comments about format. Seven responses from prompt 2 indicated concern about the proper form of research reports. Comments such as "What is the correct format?" and "What is APA style?" were very common.

Comments about evaluation. Four individuals expressed uncertainty about how their final research report would be evaluated and graded.

Summary

The preliminary action research reported in this paper was designed to serve two purposes. The first purpose was to gain knowledge about the writing experiences of experienced classroom teachers, many of whom teach writing. The second purpose was to gain feedback about my own teaching practices involving direct instruction in process writing. Several conclusions can be drawn.

Like the students in the 1990 NAEP study, the majority of experienced teachers who participated in this study do not frequently (i.e. daily or weekly) engage in writing activities. Consequently, most of these teachers perceive themselves to be inadequate writers and express feelings of anxiety and frustration when required to write in an academic setting. Their difficulties stem from their inexperience with selecting and narrowing a topic, not knowing the best way to organize information, and finding the time to actually write. While these findings confirmed my initial hunches and are not especially provocative, they are disconcerting considering that as many as one-third of the teachers involved in this study teach writing, and only one participant out of 30 related her experiences as a writer to her students' experiences as a writer.

In an attempt to encourage these individuals to fully experience the transactional nature of writing, my goal was to not only provide some direct instruction on the writing process, but also to create an awareness of how the process of writing helps us to transact with ideas and generate new thoughts. For instance, I used the manuscript I was preparing as a basis of discussing the thinking process involved in writing. I forced my students to think about their experiences as writers by having them keep journals and discussing them in class. I tried to model the importance of sharing written ideas by having students share their final papers with their classmates. Those who wished to contribute their papers had them bound and "published" in class booklet.

However, in some instances, my instruction fell short of my good intentions. For instance, even though I showed my students how to find information using the ERIC database system, we did not discuss the importance of the writer's prior knowledge and experience in the selection of or narrowing a topic. In addition, even though one of my manuscript outlines was used to model the process of sharing outlines, we spent very little time discussing alternative ways of viewing and organizing this information. Similarly, little time was spent in class discussing why and how revision occurs, and virtually all writing was done outside of class.

One of the implications from this preliminary research is that if we expect the nature of writing instruction to change at the classroom level, then teachers need to become writers themselves.

They need compelling reasons to write for real-life, authentic purposes. And they need time to write. Since it is unlikely that schools will provide this impetus in the future, university classrooms may have to.

Those who teach future and/or experienced teachers will need to concentrate on internalizing and living the writing process while being extremely cognizant of the types of instruction they implicitly and explicitly demonstrate. Requiring a research report from everyone enrolled in a graduate class is not likely an example of writing for real-life purposes. However, assignments such as preparing an article to be appear in the Parent-Teacher Newsletter, or preparing an original Reader's Theater script to be performed, or writing an explanation of the management system of an individualized spelling program to be shared with peers may have more personal value in the minds of teachers. The writing process can still be addressed, but the discussion of the process will be more fruitful since it will explore writing in several genres and for different purposes. Above all, practitioners at both university and classroom levels must establish an on-going dialogue to provide frameworks for thinking about the value of writing so that all teachers can learn from their experiences.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Given on Jan. 27, 1992

How often do you write:

	daily	weekly	monthly	yearly	seldom	never
1. poetry	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. short stories	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. personal thoughts or reflections	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. letters to friends	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. letters to editors or politicians	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. research reports	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Do you enjoy writing:

	yes	no	indifferent
1. poetry	_____	_____	_____
2. short stories	_____	_____	_____
3. personal thoughts or reflections	_____	_____	_____
4. letters to friends	_____	_____	_____
5. letters to editors or politicians	_____	_____	_____
6. research reports	_____	_____	_____

Estimate the number of research reports you have written since you graduated with your bachelor's degree _____

Estimate the number of research reports you wrote as an undergraduate _____

Estimate the number of research reports you wrote while you were in high school _____

List three or four words that describe your skill in writing research reports:

What is the most difficult aspect of writing a research report?

APPENDIX B

Prompts for Response Journals

Prompt 1 Administered on Feb. 17, 1992

1. How comfortable are you sharing your work with your peers? Why do you think you feel this way?
2. What kind of feedback about your paper outline did you receive? Be as specific as possible.
3. Was this feedback helpful or valuable to you? Why or why not?
4. How else might we have done this sharing activity to make it more meaningful to you?

Prompt 2 Administered on Feb. 24, 1992, collected on March 9, 1992

1. Record your thoughts as you write your research paper. What occupies your mind during the act of writing?

Prompt 3 Administered on March 9, 1992, collected on March 16, 1992

1. Think about Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and the levels of thinking (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation). What kinds of thinking did you do throughout the process of researching, writing, sharing, revising, and editing your paper for this course? Give specific examples of actual activities that demonstrated your thinking at various levels.

Prompts 4 Administered on March 16, 1992, collected on March 23, 1992

1. What specific skills have you developed or honed as a result of writing the research paper for this course? Which of these skills can you apply elsewhere in your life and where else will you use them?